

## Nilus Orth – Atom Pop

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Remember the sound of popcorn popping on a stovetop? Today we'll meet a Kansas manufacturing company which is continuing the tradition of stovetop popcorn poppers and bringing it into the modern era. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Nilus Orth and his brothers are owners of Bushton Manufacturing and QuinCraft Products which produce the Atom Pop popcorn popper today. This product goes back to the 1950s, when a man named Edwin Lewis started a business in the rural community of Quincy, Kansas. Quincy township today has a population of 136 people. Now, that's rural.

Mr. Lewis named the company QuinCraft Products. It was stocked with surplus aluminum spin forming machines from the post-war airplane industry.

In 1952, Mr. Lewis met an electrical engineer who had designed a cone-shaped, aluminum popcorn popper which was heated on a stovetop. The cone shape worked ideally to evenly pop the corn without shaking or stirring. The aluminum dispersed the heat quickly once it was done. Mr. Lewis bought all rights and started producing the popper in Quincy.

This was in the early 1950s when there was lots of excitement about the possibility of producing energy from atomic power. In that spirit, Mr. Lewis named the product the Atom Pop. With that, a new no-shake, no-stir popcorn popper was born.

The business grew to the point that Quincraft was producing more than 20,000 poppers a year. Then two things happened: Mr. Lewis passed away suddenly, and, eventually, microwave ovens came onto the market and took away market share from stand-alone poppers. Mr. Lewis' widow and daughter kept the popper business going and moved it to Fredonia. In 2005, the Orth brothers bought it and moved it to their manufacturing site in their hometown of Bushton, Kansas.

The Orth brothers also have historic roots in rural Kansas. "My family's been here longer than Bushton," Nilus Orth said. Orth ancestors came to Kansas in 1857 before Bushton was officially organized. Nilus and his brothers were among ten children born in their generation of the Orth family. "We have always been farmers," Nilus said.

Nilus got bachelors, masters, and Ph.D. degrees in mechanical engineering at the University of Kansas. He taught at Lamar University and, in 1995, came back to Kansas and joined his brothers in a manufacturing business. Ten years later, they bought QuinCraft and the Atom Pop popcorn popper business.

The Atom Pop still comes in the original cone-shaped design which goes on any stovetop. The design is simple and the process of using it is easy. Just add cooking oil and popcorn kernels, place on a stovetop or heat source, and enjoy the popcorn when it's done.

"My daughters did a test to compare how long it took to use the popper or the microwave," Nilus Orth said. "By the time you unwrap the microwave popcorn, unfold it and get it done in the microwave, the popper was faster," he said.

Nilus also prefers the taste of popcorn prepared in the popper compared to the microwave. "It is a night and day difference," he said.

He also believes it is healthier. As a 2015 Kansas City Star article said, “The corn stays crisper, bypassing the chemical additives in the microwave stuff that can give it an unpleasant rubbery taste.”

Perhaps nostalgia is also part of the appeal of this product. The retro look of the company website is taken directly from the classic Atom Pop marketing brochure of the 1950s. The website even has an old-time-looking video in black-and-white demonstrating how easy it is to use. The Atom Pop popcorn popper is available for purchase from dealers or from the website directly at [www.atompoppopper.com](http://www.atompoppopper.com).

“We’ve sold these poppers to all 50 states and Canada, and we’re always looking for more retail outlets,” Nilus said. “Contact us if you’re interested.”

Remember the sound of popcorn popping on the stovetop? It can still be enjoyed today, thanks to the classic Atom Pop popcorn popper. We salute Nilus Orth and all those involved with Atom Pop for making a difference with their entrepreneurship. The only thing better than the sound of popcorn popping is the taste when it’s done.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.